DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 633 CS 203 960

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TITLE Figuratively Speaking.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Writing; Descriptive Writing; *Figurative Language; Imagery; Imagination; Intermediate Grades; Language Attitudes; *Metaphors; *Poetry; *Self Expression; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a poetry program for fifth grade students that was intended to help children increase their awareness of their environment, bring order to their own experiences, and increase their sensitivity to the physical base of language. To measure change in the children's use of figurative language in prose writing, each child was asked at the beginning of the unit to write a description of one of two selected pictures. The teaching approach, aimed at stimulating children to compose original verse, was organized around three activities: (1) listening as the teacher read selected poems on familiar topics, (2) discussing the author's use of figurative language, especially simile and metaphor, and (3) composing original verses on the topic, with conscious use of simile and metaphor. At the end of the five week program, each child again wrote a composition describing the alternate picture from the pretest. Comparisons indicate that there was a significant increase in the use of figurative language after the poetry program. (MAI)

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Paper presented at
NCTE Convention
New York, 1977

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Figuratively Speaking

"Whatsa matter? Cat got yer tongue?"

"Na, just playin' it cool, man."

"Ya mean ya don't want to make like a turkey with its tail feathers on fire, but inside ya feel like a souped up Ferrari waiting for the flag to drop."

"Yeh, that's about it."

What should we understand from this short exchange of feelings? Without a doubt we realize that very strong emotions are being very determinedly kept in check. If this passage were to be written in "standard" English, no doubt the emotional impact would be lessened considerably. The point is, children communicate ideas orally in living colour but resort to the traditional, often unimaginative forms of expression in their written work. How then might they be challenged to write in living colour? In particular, how might children be encouraged to write descriptive prose in which they consciously use similes and metaphors to heighten descriptions or emotions?

Briefly, research has shown that young children often make use of figurative comparisons orally (Chukovsky, 1959; Gardner and Gardner, 1971; Brown, 1973) in an attempt to explain the world about them. While it has been demonstrated by Inhelder and Piaget (1958) and Asch and Nerlove (1960) that it is the adolescent who can adequately explain the dual meaning of a lexical term, it has also been shown that at the onset of puberty, there appears to be a diminishing of sensitivity to language (Gardner and Gardner, 1971). What we may assume then is that the basic components for the use

of figurative language are present in the pre-schooler and we know from research that the ability to perceive relationships, a process basic to the judicious use of figurative comparisons, is present in most children by the fifth grade. This particular grade level then, seems to be a most appropriate one in which to begin to focus on the writing of colourful passages through the use of figurative comparisons. Furthermore, at this time in their lives children have not yet reached the heightened level of critical faculty and self-consciousness that might conceivably cause them to resort to mundane expressions. They have a need to record graphically their conscious awareness of their experience and environment as their oral peer-to-peer communications would indicate.

Programs developed and implemented by such people as Powell (1968) and Koch (1971) revealed that the writing of poetry aroused in children a feeling for language which was demonstrated by their choice of words, use of patterns and experimentation with structures. Poetry, therefore, can be used to great advantage as a resource to help extend children's awareness and knowledge of their environment, to bring order to their experiences, and to increase sensitivity to the metaphorical base of language.

> Poetic exploration should be at the centre of English teaching, and a point at which a child's natural creative urge for symbolization should meet that of the adult poet. . .(Holbrook, 1968, p. 56)

Poetry in the Classroom

The author planned and carried out with intact classes of fifth-graders in an elementary school in Manlius, New York, an approach aimed at assisting children to become conscious users of figurative language.

The approach, which aimed to stimulate children to compose original verse, required children to: 1) listen to the investigator reading selected poems on familiar topics; 2) discuss the authors' use of figurative language, in particular the use of similes and metaphors; and 3) compose individual original verses on the topic under discussion with conscious use of similes and/or metaphors. Poems were selected that dealt with those things which were familiar to the children: their inner-most feelings, the nighttime, a season of the year, an element of nature, and an animal. The selected areas seemed to be quite appropriate for the children. for they were totally familiar with each one and exhibited no apparent difficulty in responding to them.

Listening, Discussing, Composing

In order to determine the extent to which change could be noted in the children's use of figurative language in writing of descriptive prose, each child first wrote a description of one of two selected pictures. Half the group viewed and described the picture which evoked unpleasant feelings and the other half viewed and described the picture which evoked pleasant feelings. At the end of the treatment period which consisted of one period a week for five weeks, each child again wrote a descriptive composition, this time describing the alternate picture.

The poetic experience was introduced to the fifth-graders by their listening to Timothy's Bad Day by Stacy Jo Crossen. They briefly discussed how Timothy's moods were compared to the elements, the natural outcroppings and an animal when it was angry. This appeal to individual feelings was attempted first in order to encourage original thought and reactions.

The children then considered how they felt at that moment and recorded their thoughts in a poetic form of their own choice.

During the second period of instruction they listened to Patricia Hubbell's Night and Joni Mitchell's Night in the City. They briefly discussed how what they could see in the sky or in the city at night could be described in terms of other things that were familiar to them. The children then recorded how they felt about the night by using familiar objects or feelings as a basis for comparison.

The same procedure was used during the third period. This time the focus was on seasons. Eleanor Farjeon's Pencil and Paint and Elizabeth Borchers' October were listened to and discussed. The written verse this time was to be such that an artist could paint a picture from it.

Concentration in the fourth period was on the elements. May Justus' Winds-A-Blowing was read as an example. Following discussion, the children wrote their own verses in which they compared one of nature's elements to objects with which they were familiar.

During the fifth and last period the children thought about animals, birds, or fish. They listened to Barracuda written by a student in the Bahamas, and Tiger written by a student in India. Each of these poems had a definite pattern which focused on comparisons. The children then used a similar pattern to describe an animal, bird or fish of their choosing.

Discussion

The approach which has just been described is seen as one means for helping children to develop writing skills through the development of language awareness. In particular, this focus on the persuasive power of words through the use of similes and metaphors was effected through the individual composing of original verse. Through its focus on the idea or feeling to be communicated, this form of composition, which is a natural outlet for self-expression and imaginative power, was seen as helping children first, to derive pleasure and a sense of satisfaction in being able to write precisely and with impact, and secondly, to realize that the skills acquired in the composing of poetry may be transferred to the writing of descriptive prose. The learning of any new skill or technique is not accomplished by a one-time effort. The approach described here is seen as being one that can be used easily by the classroom teacher, and replicated many times over during the year. Poetry was used as a resource for exploring language usage to help the children become more aware of the need for accurate perception; the need for reacting to experience and recording it with honesty; and the need to create those word pictures which make ideas meaningful to the receiver of the message.

The original hypothesis behind this study was that children who are exposed to poetry , participate in discussions concerning the use of figurative comparisons in the poems and then write their own verse will use significantly more figurative comparisons in their subsequent writing of descriptive prose. This hypothesis was borne out by the fact that those

children who had participated in the five week experiment used on the average of 4.13 figurative comparisons in the final descriptive composition as compared with an average of 1.02 figurative comparisons in the first descriptive paragraph. This was a significant increase ($p = 0.001$) in the use of figurative comparisons. This final accomplishment is dependent in part on the provision of a responsive environment characterized by provision for creative growth.

All evidence in the literature points to the fact that preadolescents make little or no use of figurative comparisons in their written prose when not directed to do so (Wald, 1975; Shapiro and Shapiro, 1971). When children are encouraged to respond in a creative manner by their teacher(s), thinking skills are developed as they begin to participate actively in the learning process (Torrance, 1972; Guilford, 1971, Doll, Jr., 1973; Rothkopf, 1973). Questions were posed during the discussion periods to focus attention on the use by the authors of similes and metaphors. The children were therefore guided in their thinking about the use of figurative comparisons in order to help them in their own problem-solving situations as they pertained to the writing of original verse (Gordon, 1972). In conclusion, these fifth grade children showed significant improvement in their writing of descriptive prose as measured by the incidence of figurative comparisons, when they had repeated opportunities to listen to poetry, to discuss the figurative comparisons therein, and to compose poetry themselves.

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